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Giving Voice to Dutch Moroccan Girls on the Internet

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Abstract
The article is about the discussion board of a Moroccan website, which has become a big success, judging by the thousands of messages that are posted daily. The majority of the visitors are young Dutch Moroccan girls who have discovered the endless possibilities of this new medium. In this anonymous context, girls raise all kinds of sensitive issues such as relationships, marriage, or religion which they would dare not discuss in public. These discussion boards challenge the traditional, passive image of women, offering them an opportunity for greater self-expression. These websites give them a voice. This voice places the emphasis on agency, acknowledging the speakers' opportunity to express their messages. Dutch Moroccan girls are more restricted in their freedom of movement than boys, and thus, the Internet widens their horizons.

> "*Numerous Muslim girls learn to be humble and veiled, to obey their fathers and brothers who monitor their virginity and eventually force them to a marriage with a partner who is not chosen by them.*"

The above quote is taken from a newspaper column by the Dutch author Elsbeth Etty (2003). Etty states that the family is a place of "oppression" for Muslim girls. This quote serves as one example of the various ways Muslim women are represented by Dutch media. The Dutch media sets forth the belief that emancipation and Islam are not compatible (Nieuwkerk, 2004; Moors 2005). Moreover, this is not a specifically Dutch opinion, but part of the West's growing tendency to stereotype Islam, producing similar simplistic images of passive and oppressed Muslim women (Hassan, 2001; Werbner, 2002; Karim, 2005). Much has been written about Muslim women in the media, but very little of it is drawn from direct contact. Since the inception of the Internet, it has been possible to follow the "unheard stories" of Muslims, including women, on numerous websites and homepages (Mitra, 2001, p. 31; Bunt 2005). In the Netherlands Muslims or Dutch Moroccans launched the first website *Maroc.nl*, in 2000.

In February 2001 a small group of Dutch Moroccan young men set up the marriage magazine *Yasmina* on the Moroccan website *Maroc.nl.* The site provides a wealth of information about the arrangement of marriage parties, health, beauty and lifestyle. The most exciting part of this website is the discussion board, which consists of topics about relationships between boys and girls, women and Islam, marriage and the position of women. This forum has become a big success, judging by the thousands of messages that are posted daily. The majority of the visitors are young Dutch Moroccan girls who have discovered the endless possibilities of this new medium. In this anonymous context, girls raise all kinds of sensitive issues which they would not dare to raise in public.

This story of how girls appropriate new technology, such as this website, illustrates the notion that women can also be active agents instead of passive victims, which was the traditional assumption in most technology studies of the eighties (Wajcman, 2000). Women are active consumers, especially in regard to communication (Spender, 1995). Since the Internet is very dynamic, the weblogs, a recent development where people can publish their diary online, seem to be increasingly popular among Muslim women (Bunt, 2005).

This paper emphasizes how girls achieve agency by appropriating a website based on their own needs and desires. Discussion of various sensitive topics implies that girls can make contact with other people without the social control of their parents, and without crossing social boundaries. Anonymous participation makes online forums very attractive. While the debates are for enjoyment, sometimes verbally abusive language disturbs the course of the debate (Walters, 2005). Discussion boards must be moderated so that participants follow the etiquette of the site. Moderators of this above website are usually recruited from the frequent users, often those who post ten messages a day.

When analyzing the online forum discussions, the relationship with the real world must be taken into consideration. While it seems that the website and lived experience are separate spheres, a closer examination will demonstrate how this medium can provide insight into the lives of the participants. Ward (1999) argued that an online community is related to the wider offline world and that the virtual requires the physical to infuse it with meaning. Wajcman (2000) calls this interrelated connection "mutually constitutive" (p. 451).

The goal of this paper is to examine how online forums are made into an appropriate place to raise and discuss issues regarding the lives of girls, such as relationships, marriage or religion, thus providing a discursive place for the exchange of advice and for debate. These online discussions can shed light on how new information technologies assist in an understanding of the changing position of Muslim girls in a Western country. As Illingworth (2001) and Mitra (2001) explained, the Internet is an effective tool, that can uncover the invisible voice of marginal groups, particularly women. The Internet provides a new social space for those who are marginalized and lack social power in daily life (Wheeler, 2001; Mitra, 2001). I argue that these online forums provide girls with more opportunities to raise sensitive issues while keeping within their social boundaries in the offline world. These discussion boards challenge the traditional, passive image of women in technology, offering them an opportunity for greater self-expression. These websites give them a voice. The next section will focus on the concept of voice, giving examples of how that voice takes shape on different websites.

Marginal Voices

Mitra and Watts (2002) provide a theoretical lens to achieve insight into the perspectives of marginalized groups and their use of the internet (p. 480). Muslim girls in the Netherlands are victims of forced marriages, arranged by their families, or victims of beatings by their fathers or husbands. In particular Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Somalian Member of Parliament of the liberal right wing party, cites such images of women in relation to Islam (Moors, 2005; Ghorashi, 2003).

Mitra (2001) points out that immigrants are now able to form networks on the Internet, which allows them to have "a sense of belonging" (p. 30). Mitra demonstrates that through voicing their views on homepages a group of diasporic Indians transforms their identities and images, and challenges some of the stereotypical images produced by the dominant culture. Marginalized people can articulate their oppositional ideologies, and question the dominant view of them, on their homepages. The possibility of hyperlinked connections with members of their network, and with other marginalized groups, is important. Berber websites, for instance *Tamaynut.nl*, put links on their site for Berber groups in Morocco, France, and other countries.

The narratives produced on the Internet can stimulate the production of new identities, as Mitra (2001) notes. According to Myra Georgiou (2002), the Internet offers a new context for thinking about identity and community. She also emphasizes that the Internet has become a new means of direct communication for ethnic communities and an alternative to mainstream media and community discourse. Many websites created by Dutch Moroccan youths have emerged. These websites criticize the mainstream image experienced by these youths and offer an opportunity for them to express their opinions. Mitra (2001) indicates the potential for entering a dialogue between marginalized groups and the dominant culture. Both Dutch Moroccans and Dutch natives who represent the dominant cultural views participate in web discussions. (Brouwer and Wijma, 2006).

Since *voice* implies agency, it gives speakers on the Internet "the opportunity to be the agents" of their own meanings (Mitra and Watts, 2002, p. 484). Dutch Moroccan youths who post messages on Moroccan discussion boards express their narratives and views in their own terms. This expression highlights the structures of power that underlie the Internet. In traditional media, ethnic minorities have to struggle to be heard because the power of the dominant discourse ignores marginal voices. Marginalized groups can become powerful by creating a web page, or posting a message on a discussion board, and the ability "to speak" can be more important than to be "heard" (p. 490).

A legitimate voice includes the notion of "truth, accuracy, and eloquence," in connection with "lived experience" in a "genuine way" (Mitra and Watts, 2002, p. 490). The availability of a great deal of information sources makes it possible for web users to judge the authenticity of a voice. For instance, the webmasters of the Moroccan websites criticized the dominant Dutch western media for their stereotypes of Islam and perceived the sources of *Al Jazeera* as more reliable, or more authentic.

To appear truthful and trustworthy, the speaker must be able to articulate "eloquently," but similarly the reader must be able to assess what the speaker contributes (p. 491). This can raise problems for young web users who lack knowledge on a certain topic. As a result, young Muslims can be receptive to radical Islamic ideas, a concern for the local Muslim leaders (Labovic, 2005), and for the webmasters of *Maroc.nl.* . Many voices can present their views on a single issue, but the reader judges their authenticity and chooses a certain perspective (Mitra and Watts, 2002, p. 494).

More than thirty Moroccan websites on the internet seeking to present an authentic image of Dutch Moroccans compete for the attention of a target group of Dutch Moroccan youths. For instance, Dutch Moroccans of Berber origin thought the Moroccan websites paid too little attention to the specific position of Berbers and initiated their website *Amazigh.nl*, with their tradition, history, and culture as the central focus. Also, Dutch Moroccan students set up the website *MaghrebOnline.nl* to stimulate the awareness of various topics among Moroccan youth. The website initiated discussions on Palestine, Iraq, Guantanamo, and the Arabic European League. Muslim women, who had more than enough sites on dating, politics and war, launched their own websites, such as *Saloua.nl*, to gain more knowledge on Islamic topics. All these new initiatives make the Internet a very dynamic place, with different websites competing to present an authentic voice.

These groups experiment with the Internet, participate in their online forums, and express alternative voices to those claiming homogenous and bounded national cultures, as Georgiou (2002) has noted. In online forums, individuals can claim a space, establish a visible presence, challenge their own identities, and imagine a community where they can have a different opinion. Moreover, forums are places where people can "adopt and adapt the Internet" to their own needs and views (Wheeler, 2002, p. 3). Therefore, the Internet is a tool that supports many uses and effects, such as consensus building and counter discourse.

Background of the Study

The anonymity of the online forum raises questions about the identity of the participants. By applying different qualitative and quantitative methods of research, I sought to find out more about the background of the users. In cooperation with students1 I read numerous online debates, sent an online survey to the users, conducted offline surveys and interviews among youths, and attended several public meetings organized by different Moroccan organizations on social integration or Islam2. I participated in organizing a national meeting about choices of marriage partners, distributed a survey, and led two workshops on online dating3. The fieldwork I conducted in two digital community centres in Amsterdam offered an opportunity for informal talk and interviews with Dutch Moroccan users of various websites (Brouwer, 2004). Besides these users, I spoke with the webmasters of the websites *Yasmina.nl* and *Maroc.nl* and four moderators. All these different strategies resulted in approximately seventy-five responses.

The visits to the offline meetings made the differences between online and offline debates more apparent. For instance, more men than women usually attended public discussion debates, while in online debates it is the opposite. The advantage of going online is that a girl does not need to cross any sexual boundary. Less educated youths and youths under twenty do not generally frequent these public discussion meetings, though they comprise the majority of the participants on the discussion boards. These differences make the online forums unique since they reach more participants than an offline debate.

Online forums can meet the needs of more people who want to react to a specific event, such as the murder of a Dutch filmmaker by a young Dutch Moroccan man in November 2004. A great many media articles in the media discussed this incident. Since the murderer was a radical Muslim, Islam was associated with radicalism. Online responses paralleled various offline debates. This murder provoked numerous discussions about Islam, drawing in the oppression of women, focussing on “headscarves” and “arranged marriages” (Nieuwkerk, 2004, p. 233).

> Another key point that web visitors made was on the choice of a marriage partner. Since it is not appropriate for a Muslim girl to go to a café to meet the opposite sex, the Internet functions as a protected meeting place. If a girl wants to make a date with a boy, after some chat sessions, she will meet with the intended party in the company of friends. This demonstrates how the online and offline worlds cannot be separated from each other and how youngsters integrate both spheres in their personal lives.

The respondents cite various reasons to participate in online discussions. The main motive is curiosity about the views of other Dutch Moroccans. One of them said: “to hear another view can be very interesting and you can learn something.” This further emphasizes the importance of having a space of their own, a place where they can meet with others. One respondent states that it is “cool” to have such a forum, where you do not have “to explain all the time” your ethnic background because “we Moroccans just understand each other.” They might also go online if they disagree with somebody and want to debate.

> Anonymity is a significant precondition for participating in the debates. One girl wrote that she attended a few meetings but decided to remain anonymous: “Personal contact is difficult in our culture; you never know who you can trust.” The anonymity of the Internet can provide visitors with opportunities to experiment without the social confines imposed by the community.

The website *Yasmina.nl* is currently a part of the increasing virtual community. To become a member of the website, one has to invent a nickname and register. Most choose a name related to their ethnic background or place of origin, such as *Mocrogirl* or *MyssyNadoria.* Others call themselves *Powergirl* or *Missmafia*. In the forum of *Yasmina.nl*, the most popular board among Dutch Moroccan girls, the themes of love, Islam, and sexuality emerge.

In *Asking it Yasmina*, participants look for general information on labor possibilities, school and education, and computer problems. Subjects relating to Moroccan background, such as seeking information about Moroccan names and learning the Berber or Arabic language, have the most page views (March 13, 2006). According to the responses I received, these topics seem to interest a lot of members.

In another response, members tell a girl not to learn the Berber language since it is too difficult and that Arabic is more important. The discussion about the Arabic language lasts almost seven months and is good for 507 reactions and 14.000 page views. A girl notes she can speak but not read Arabic. Information is exchanged on institutions where one can attend lessons. Although the discussion is conducted in Dutch, the members are seriously interested in their own language, which can be considered as an important marker of their Moroccan or Berber identity.

Islam as an Online Theme

In numerous discussions on the forum, members explore how a "good" Muslim ought to behave in various social situations. Contributors share personal experiences and invite others to share their opinions. When discussing Islam, one of the most common themes involves headscarves. Contributors share their views on whether or not to wear headscarves, and how headscarves should be worn. For example, should girls wear headscarves in combination with tight trousers while attending Moroccan parties? One girl invites the opinion of other members on this issue (March 15, 2006). In two days, 75 responses and 527 page views are drawn. The various answers demonstrate the struggle girls experience in an effort to negotiate strict Muslim demands placed on them with liberal youth culture. Girls are criticized for this shameful, paradoxical behavior. However, other girls try to generate support for the idea that following Muslim rules is difficult. These girls refer to religious terms, noting that such a decision is a matter to be resolved by each individual.

The girl who started the discussion concludes that a headscarf stands for "decency and protection," and that covering, in combination with tight clothes is "playing, not showing respect." According to her, modern clothing is acceptable as long as it is "neat." Another meaning she attaches to the headscarf is "freedom of choice." She acknowledges that girls who choose their religion deserve her full respect.

This discussion is mostly conducted by Dutch Moroccan girls, but three boys who intervene disturb the course of the debate by using abusive language and challenging the girls about whether chatting with boys on the internet violates Islamic traditions. The boys then advise the girls to help their mothers in the kitchen. Although the girls do not welcome these aggressive statements, they seek to counteract the boys' behavior by attempting to initiate a discussion with them. The "self-correcting" forces in this example are not strong enough to compel members to conduct themselves in a responsible manner (Mitra and Watts, 2002, p. 495).

> Herring (2000) has examined this dominant role of men in online interaction in several studies and has stated that online communication discriminates against women. Often this anti-social behavior from disruptive males results in women starting their own online communities. Women tend to participate more actively in online discussions when the norms of interaction are controlled by moderators. This is why moderation is so important. A dispute, which harms the website's authenticity, is the main reason some girls stop visiting the forums. The girls become disappointed in the quality of the discussion and move to alternative discussion boards.

The website *Yasmina.nl* provides Dutch Moroccans with space to publish an online column and to express their views. In one of the columns, a young female student writes about her decision to wear a headscarf, focusing on the responses she received from Dutch people around her (November 17, 2005). In her short column, she challenges the Western prejudice towards

Muslim women which implies that emancipation and headscarves are incompatible. She articulates her views on liberation and emancipation, which includes giving equal rights to Muslims and Christians. She claims that it is her choice whether or not to wear a headscarf and that Dutch people do not like outspoken Muslim girls.

Muslim girls find a place to challenge the stereotypical representation of Muslim women in the Dutch public media. The girls examine Islamic traditions, negotiating and disputing with each other about the right interpretation. These disputes are similar to initiatives made by Muslim women to find a space where they can discuss the negative Western negative attitudes towards Islam while contesting male dominance in Muslim communities. Karim (2005) labels these types of sites as a "third space," a place where women can negotiate different perspectives as presented in women's offline magazine *Azizah*, a journal of American Muslim women (p. 171). In this journal, women write about their own images and perspectives on faith, similar to those images and perspectives expressed by Dutch Moroccan girls. This journal has become a critical medium for American Muslim women, challenging the homogenous image of Muslim women as passive and oppressed. Riffat Hassan (2001) observes that Muslim women find support in the West as long as they are seen as "rebels" within the world of Islam (p. 208). This explains the extensive media attention given to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Somalian Member of Parliament who rejects Islam, as a former believer (see also Ghorashi, 2003, p. 168). However, in Hassan's view, when "rebellious" Muslim women discover they cannot identify with Western, secular culture, they feel isolated and alone. According to Hassan (2001), little attention is paid to Muslim women who seek to maintain their religious identity and personal autonomy (p. 208). But despite these difficulties, through the unparalleled reach and speed of the internet, there is a "third" space where women can articulate such feelings.

Marriage as an Online Theme

The topic of marriage, relationships, virginity, and love are very popular on *Yasmina.nl*. Marriage is an important matter to Dutch Moroccan families. Girls are expected to negotiate with their parents about the proper age to marry, the background of the future groom, and whether or not the groom will become a member of the family. The demand for the bride's good reputation and virginity, which is related to the honour of the family, complicates contemporary Moroccan marriages. While their parents were a product of an arranged marriage, young girls today have more influence in the process of marriage (Eickelman, 2002).

> Marriage has become even more complex since the government strengthened the immigration laws and made it more difficult for youths to marry a partner from abroad. Of the second generation Dutch Moroccans, 61 percent of girls and 56 percent of boys marry a partner from Morocco (Sterckx and Bouw, 2005, p. 14). Marriage migration is one of just a few means of entering the Netherlands, but policy measures in November 2004 restricted immigration. New immigrants have to a pass a "civic integration examination." Since transmigration marriages end in divorce more frequently than conventional marriages, the government perceives these marriages as bad for the integration process of migrant families (p. 15). This issue combined with the stereotype of arranged marriages as forced have become popular topics on discussion boards, as well as offline. One of the significant observations made at an offline gathering is that forced marriages are prohibited in Islam, and that marriage without the consent of both partners is not permitted. Clearly, a need for communication on this complex topic has been articulated, and online forums meet these needs.

The forum of the website *Yasmina.nl* covers a wide range of topics regarding marriage matters, such as that encapsulated in the question raised by a girl who wants to know why Dutch Moroccan boys prefer brides from Morocco. "They are raised differently," she explains. In the lively discussion that follows, various perspectives are exchanged, with 152 reactions posted and 885 page views in two days (March 20, 2006). One participant claims girls from Morocco are

"innocent and easy victims," quite the opposite of the self-awareness expressed by Dutch Moroccan girls. This view is disputed by a boy who disapproves of the liberal behavior of Dutch Moroccan girls. According to his view " It is not that strange for boys to go to Morocco for their bride…they have to."

In a column published on *MaghrebOnline.nl* a Dutch Moroccan girl challenges this choice of a Moroccan marriage partner which she perceives as a "big gamble." "Will a suitor really love me?" she wonders, or "will they love my residence permit more?" She believes women are under more pressure to marry than men, which can result in marrying too quickly. Official figures confirm the rise in divorce among Dutch Moroccan women who marry a partner from Morocco (Sterckx and Bouw, 2005). The column begins with a description of "summertime in romantic Morocco," which within Muslim culture generally means attending a lot of wedding feasts and looking for a suitable marriage partner. But when the new marriage partner arrives in the Netherlands, the columnist observes, the fairy tale soon comes to an end. The girl concludes her column with a call to women to follow their hearts and not to be swayed by narrow-minded views. "A strong woman makes her own decision and a weak woman will be decided for," she states. In a sample of twenty responses, most of the readers compliment the columnist for raising this crucial issue. Some of the readers frame their response within Islamic discourse by referring to the Prophet Mohammed's first wife, who was an independent woman.

> Members use the forum as an outlet for more personal problems. An 18 year-old girl who was physically abused during her marriage divorced after eight months. She wants to marry a 29 year-old man who supported her during this difficult time. Although his family will never accept a divorced girl, she thinks she deserves a second chance. She criticizes Moroccan culture, which is in her case a "true obstacle." This message received thirty responses and 339 page views in ten days (March 13, 2006). All the responses show support for the girl, stating that she should make her own choice, start an autonomous life, concentrate on her future, and be independent of this boyfriend. The responses encourage an examination of Islam. The girl replies with gratitude and explains that she is living with her family and attending school.

Another sensitive topic is that of mixed marriages since a Muslim girl is obliged to marry a Muslim partner, preferably of Moroccan descent. One discussion is initiated by a 22 year-old girl who has a black boyfriend and challenges this tradition by claiming ethnic origin or belief is not important and that love is all that counts. This debate lasts more than a year (2004-2005) and provokes 774 reactions from three hundred visitors, stimulating a discussion on acceptable options regarding marriage partners. However, most contributors condemn mixed marriages, believing that it is wrong and disrespectful for a Muslim girl not to marry a Muslim or Moroccan partner. They are optimistic that her partner will convert to Islam, and that this will solve the problem. Only a few support her choice by agreeing that love is important in marriage. Despite the cultural tradition of a Moroccan marriage as a family matter, the website's members encourage the girl and her boyfriend to make their own decision.

Contributors criticize their culture, where women have an unequal position, but they do this within an Islamic context. They concur with Muslim feminists like Azza Karam (2001), who is trying to find "a middle course between interpretations of socio-political and cultural realities according to Islam and Human Rights discourse" (p. 184). This manner of articulating an opposing view runs counter to the views of mainstream Dutch discourse, where Muslim women seem to be emancipated only by rejecting their faith. This point of view, according to Karam (2001), can only lead to "serious fragmentation within society, and is thus unrealistic as an option" (p. 184).

Conclusion

These forums and columns on Moroccan websites give girls a chance to express their views as active agents able to make individual choices, without disputing Islam as a belief.

Websites and their discussion boards are important initiatives on the part of Dutch Moroccan youths, providing them with a uniquely flexible tool with which to exchange ideas and allow themselves to be "heard." Understanding the concept of voice, as described by Mitra and Watts (2002), contributes to studying these online initiatives. For those who lack a voice in the traditional media, online websites become a form of agency.

While earlier websites were launched as a critique of the mainstream media, more than thirty Dutch Moroccan websites have now been set up, providing space for different perspectives, and affording Dutch Moroccan youths an authentic voice. Mitra and Watts (2002) introduce the notion of "authenticity" to express the validity of these voices, the implication being that they are articulating their lived experience in a "genuine" and truthful way (p. 490). Although the notion of authenticity is a complicated concept to operationalize, the number of visitors to these websites can act as a form of measurement. The great diversity of the online websites actually mirrors the offline range of groups and views.

> Girls in particular have discovered the potential of the websites and online forums. Dutch Moroccan girls can be considered, in Mitra and Watts' (2002) terms, as a marginalized group who use the internet to articulate their position in Dutch society, as well as in their community. Since Dutch Moroccan girls are more restricted in their freedom, the Internet allows them to question and challenge cultural constructs. The Internet also functions as a secure dating venue for some Dutch Moroccan youths who lack places where they can meet informally. The anonymity of these forums makes it very easy to discuss all kind of different issues. Girls are enabled as active agents, initiating discussions through the forums, writing about their lived experiences in online columns and acting as moderators, observing debates. Dutch Moroccan girls have to struggle against western stereotypes and against the restrictions they encounter within their families and communities. The internet offers them a new place, or in terms of Karim's terms (2005) a "third" space, beyond the control of their parents. Participants discuss their own ideas about the role of Dutch Moroccan women in society, stressing the importance of independence, education, and making individual choices within an Islamic context. These girls demonstrate counterviews towards the dominant western image of Muslim women as well as to their own communities.

Notes

1. De Gier, 2005, Nijntjes, 2006, Peters, 2004, Rinkema, 2005, Wijma, 2005, Nijntjes and Wijma, 2006.
2. Debates held in youth centres Argan and Paradiso, the Tropical Institute KIT, Mondriaan Lyceum, Community centres Eigenwijks and Diamantbuurt and finally in the centres of De Rode Hoed en de Balie in Amsterdam between 2004 and 2005.
3. Breda, November, 11 2005. Organised by the youth section of the Association of Moroccans (SMT).

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